

How Parents and Families Support Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

STRATEGIES

Introduction

Alphabet knowledge and early writing are separate but related skills that together support later reading and writing. Young children show they are developing an understanding of alphabet knowledge and early writing when they:

- Scribble to share a message, for example, taking an order in a pretend restaurant
- Form letters that begin to look more and more like conventional print
- Write (or try to write) their names
- Begin to recognize letters and letter sounds

Children develop knowledge about writing and the alphabet when they have meaningful experiences in the language or languages they know well. Early writing supports later writing by developing children's understanding of the purposes and functions of written language. It also supports children's later reading because children learn about the relationship between print and language. Alphabet knowledge also supports children's understanding of letter-sound relationships, which is key to both reading and writing in English and many other languages.



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Supporting babies to develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

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Babies are developing language and motor skills as they watch, listen, and touch everything around them. Through meaningful interactions with parents and family members and through opportunities to safely explore their environment, babies learn about their world and develop knowledge and ideas that they will write about someday.

Babies begin to develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing when parents and family members:

- ▶ Form secure relationships with babies by responding to their interests and to their need for sleeping and feeding (Pianta, 2006)
- ▶ Encourage babies to reach for, grasp, shake, and bang objects with a fist grip
- ▶ Offer babies a variety of safe toys and objects, such as balls, spoons, and cups, all with a variety of textures—smooth, bumpy, and soft (Barton & Brophy-Herb, 2006)
- ▶ Let babies experiment with different materials, allowing them to play with water, sand, and finger paints, for example (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2007)
- ▶ Talk to babies as they play and discover how objects work; name objects, describe their textures and shapes, and demonstrate the sounds or actions they make (Pierce & Profio, 2006)
- ▶ Cuddle up and look at books with babies every day, labeling or describing some of the pictures (Hoffman & Cassano, 2013; Zambo & Hansen, 2007)



Some ways parents and family members support babies' Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

STRATEGIES

At Home

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Nine-month-old Mason is playing with a ball, a plastic bowl, and a cereal box while his mother and brother Alex sit with him.

"What is he doing?"

Alex asks. "He's

learning how things work," Mom explains.

"Watch how he moves the ball from one hand to the other. He's getting really good at that!" Alex picks up

the ball after Mason drops it. He quickly tosses it from hand to hand. "I can do that!" he brags. "Of course you can," Mom says. "You are bigger and have more control over your hands than your baby brother. But there was a time when you worked hard to catch your own foot—which you would put in your mouth." Alex laughs and watches as Mason reaches for the plastic bowl, puts it in his mouth, and then bangs it on the floor. "What is he learning now?" Alex asks. Mom smiles. "I think he is learning that bowls do not make good snacks."



On a Home Visit

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Twelve-month-old Sūn reaches for the pen in his home visitor's hand. "Oh! You want to write, too?" she asks as she hands him the pen. She removes several pieces of colored construction paper from her bag and places them in front of him. "I like your blue writing," she says as Sūn grips the pen in his fist and begins to make marks on the paper. "Here are some more colors to try," she says as she places several crayons down next to the paper. "Now you have a green crayon, a yellow crayon, and a red crayon to write with." Sūn picks up the green crayon in his other hand and continues to explore what his hands can do.

Supporting toddlers to develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

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Toddlers enjoy making marks. Many giggle with delight or stare in surprise when they accidentally make marks by jabbing or poking at paper with a marker. Their hands are stronger than they were just a few months ago. They are learning how writing tools work and how to control them. Toddlers learn about writing and print when they see parents and family members writing and when these important people talk about print. Toddlers are observing and learning that writing (and print) is meaningful and important.

Toddlers develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing skills when parents and family members:

- ▶ Write in front of them by doing such things as texting, writing notes or emails, or making a shopping or “to do” list (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984)
- ▶ Talk about how writing works, including the alphabet and words (e.g., “Oh look. The P on the pizza box is just like the P in your name, ‘Pilar.’” Or “This says ‘wet paint’ so we don’t want to touch it.”) (Neumann, Hood, Ford, & Neumann, 2011)
- ▶ Encourage children to write in meaningful ways (e.g., “We are going grocery shopping. Here is paper. You can make your list while I make mine.”)
- ▶ Create safe spaces for children to write in—such as child-size tables, high chairs, and easels—with lots of writing materials: paper, envelopes, pencils, and markers (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013)
- ▶ Write down what children say, and read it back to them (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004)
- ▶ Encourage children to talk about what they draw and write (e.g., “Tell me about this.”) and build on children’s explanations of their drawings (e.g., “I like how you wrote your name.”) (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013)



Some ways parents and family members support toddlers' Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

STRATEGIES

At Home

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Sixteen-month-old Pedro is having breakfast with his Papi. Pedro wants more of his favorite cereal. "Mine!" he says, pointing to the yellow box. "This one?" Papi asks, turning the box around. After looking at the front of the box, Pedro says, "Not Papi's! Want mine!" He points to the other yellow box. "Is this the one you want?" Papi asks, reaching for the other box. "Yeah!" Pedro says and claps when he sees the picture on the front of the cereal box. He pushes his bowl towards his father.



In the Community

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Eighteen-month-old Tatiana is going for her afternoon walk with her babysitter, Megan. As they walk, they play their favorite sign game. "Dat one!" Tatiana says, pointing. "That one says 'Stop,'" Megan explains. "It means that all the cars and busses have to stop." "Stop car, stop bus!" Tatiana chants and then points to another sign. "That one says 'One Way,'" Megan tells her. As they continue down the street, Megan reads the signs Tatiana points out. They play this game so often that Tatiana is beginning to recognize some of the signs on her own. It won't be long before she knows them all!

In the Community

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Two-year-old Frankie is sitting in the seat of the shopping cart. When his mother takes out her grocery list, Frankie shouts, "Mine!" and reaches for it. "No Frankie," says Mom. "I need this list or I will forget what we need. But can you help me?" She points to the first word on the list. "This says 'butter.' We need butter. Can you help me look for the butter?" "Butter," Frankie echoes. "Butter, butter, butter." "That's right," his mom says. "Let's find the butter."

Supporting preschoolers to develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

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Many preschoolers are interested in writing. Some use scribbles to tell a story or to pretend to take a restaurant order. Other preschoolers show their interest in writing by using letters and letter-like symbols—sometimes asking an adult to “read what it says.” When adults read and write with children, children begin to see writing as meaningful and important!

Alphabet knowledge includes letter-name knowledge (in both capital and lower case), letter-sound knowledge, and letter-writing ability. Children learn meaningful letters first—such as the letters in their name—and then other letters that they see often, for example, the letters in the names of family members.



Preschoolers develop Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing when parents and family members:

- ▶ Model interest in letters by talking about the alphabet and pointing out letters in children’s names and other meaningful letters; for example, letters that are in the names of their family members, friends, pets (Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006)
- ▶ Share alphabet songs and alphabet books and provide children with magnetic letters, alphabet puzzles and other alphabet games (Paratore, Cassano, & Schickedanz, 2011)
- ▶ Draw children’s attention to print in the community—for example, stop and exit signs, advertisements and logos—and in the home using labels, email, mail and other kinds of print (Baghban, 1984)
- ▶ Help children focus on beginning sounds in words; for example, by sorting toys or pictures by sound (Gillon, 2007)
- ▶ Encourage them to write the letters in their names and other letters of interest (Treiman & Broderick, 1998)
- ▶ Encourage preschoolers to write for real and important reasons, such as making cards, books, and signs or sending emails (Adams, 1990)
- ▶ Use different materials to make writing extra fun; for example, using playground chalk, sand, finger-paint, shaving cream (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2007)

Some ways parents and family members support preschoolers' Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

STRATEGIES

At Home

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Four-year-old Adrijana and her mother are making a card for her nana's birthday. When Adrijana finishes coloring the cards, Mum says, "Okay. Now let's write your name. Watch me! I make a line down, another line down, and a line across the middle." Mum makes an "A" at the top of the paper and then hands a pencil to Adrijana. "Here. You

try it." Mum gently guides Adrijana's hand as she makes an "A." "Yeah. You made an "A" for Adrijana," she says as she writes the rest of Adrijana's name on the card. "All done!" Mum says as she puts the card in an envelope. "Now I'll make a card for you!" Adrijana announces. "Oh, thank you," Mum says. "And when you finish drawing, let's write your name on it."



On a Home Visit

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Jenifer is conducting a home visit with Miguel and his mother Maya, who primarily speak Spanish. Although Jenifer speaks mostly English, she knows a few Spanish phrases to help her communicate with Miguel and Maya. After chatting for a few moments, Miguel leaves the room and returns carefully carrying a homemade book. "*Mostrarle* [show her]," Maya says. Jenifer watches as Miguel lovingly opens the cover to reveal several pages of drawings of cars and trucks—Miguel's favorite things! Under each picture Maya has printed a description in Spanish, such as "*un camión de volteo*," and Miguel has traced over the words. Although Jenifer cannot read the Spanish phrase, the first page is clearly a dump truck. "What a great dump truck," she says. "Did you write this?" she asks while gesturing to show "writing." Miguel and Maya both smile and nod. Miguel then asks if he can bring his book to show his Head Start friends. They all agree that this is a great idea!

References for Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

STRATEGIES

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This document was prepared under Grant #90HC0001 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, by the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic>

